

# MAKING THE CUT

## INTENSE COURSE PREPARES AIRMEN FOR ARMY RANGER SCHOOL

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**S**canning the horizon, 1st Lt. Ralph Johnson takes in his surroundings. Out here in the desert, the land is flat and stretches as far as he can see. Worse yet, there is no real cover to speak of, just the occasional Joshua tree or small T indentation in the ground.

But none of that matters. There is nothing he can do about it and, if his intel is right, the team had been briefed to expect enemy activity in this area. He is the point man, too, meaning he needs to be on his toes. The men behind the lieutenant are counting on him, and he sure doesn't want to be the one to let them down or have to tell someone's family why Johnny didn't come home.

Nope, not on his watch.

Then, ahead, something catches his eye. Instinctively he raises his right hand and signals the squad to stop. As one, the men behind him stop in their tracks and take to a knee.

Squinting against the bright sun,

the lieutenant scans the area ahead, his pulse quickening, his senses on high alert.

There. Peering around the corner of a makeshift building 100 yards ahead is the unmistakable silhouette of a man wearing Middle Eastern garb.

"Contact," the lieutenant whispers into his radio. "We have one, I repeat one, possible hostile at 100 yards. Over."

"Roger. Check it out," comes the response from his platoon leader.

"Roger," he says into the radio. To the three men around him he says, "Alpha, on me."

The lieutenant moves and his squad falls in behind. The men move with cautious speed to a closer position, always keeping the figure in sight.

Out of the corner of his eye, Lieutenant Johnson sees two other squads — one on his left, the other on his right — also moving into better positions.

"That'll be Bravo and Charlie

squads," he thinks. "Good, we've got all the firing angles covered."

"This is Alpha," he whispers into the radio. "Target is still there, should we proceed?"

"Roger," the response crackles over the radio. "Proceed with cau ..."

Brrrrrap, brrrrrap, brrrrrap.

The message is interrupted by the sound of automatic weapons, their reports tearing through the air. The men instinctively hit the ground, their bodies tense, eyes wide.

The lieutenant's radio erupts with chatter.

"Contact."

"Contact!"

"Hostiles on the right ... heavy fire."

"We have one friendly hit, repeat one frie ..."

"Return fire. Take them out!"

Time seems to slow down, every second lasting for what seems like a minute. Then, once the immediate shock wears off, time returns to its regular speed and the lieutenant jumps into action.

"Get that 240 up here," he yells





into the radio. "We need suppressing fire."

He glances at his squad, sees the determination he wants to in their faces and urges them into action.

"Okay, let's go Alpha. We'll move to that ditch over there."

Crouched low, the lieutenant takes off, returning fire in small bursts as he moves. Reaching the ditch he dives in and feels the thuds of his men diving in after him. He glances around and sees Bravo and Charlie squads lying in the open, still pinned down by enemy fire, their squad leaders screaming into their radios.

Then, an awesome sound joins the fray. The unmistakable boom of a 240B heavy machine gun.

Rap, rap, rap.

There's our suppressing fire, he thinks. Bravo and Charlie squads are already up and moving, the barrels of their weapons spouting white flames and smoke. Lieutenant Johnson orders his men to move and they dash forward, weapons raised to eye level.

The lieutenant sees a man crouched near the building and lets loose a burst from his M-4. The man falls, dead. Around him, others also fall.

The squads keep moving and within seconds the skirmish is over.

"You lost one man here, but if this had been real, you probably would've lost a whole heck of a lot more."

The men all look up at the voice, its owner towering above them on a small pile of dirt and loose rock. His eyes are steel and he points

#### Airman 1st Class

Michael Eckert takes fire during a Pre-Ranger Course training exercise at Creech Air Force Base, Nev.

## TO EARN A RANGER TAB, THESE MEN NEED TO PERFORM AT THEIR VERY BEST IN THE WORST OF CONDITIONS.

— Senior Master Sgt. Darryl LeBouef

"Status report?" asks the platoon leader.

"Uh, we have one friendly KIA and three enemy," responds one of the other squad leaders.

"Crap," the platoon leader says, looking dejected.

"Crap is right," booms a voice.

one long finger at the platoon leader.

"Your squads were too separated and it took you forever to get your heavy weapons team into the fight," he said. "That was pathetic and disappointing."

The platoon leader says nothing.





**(clockwise from left)** Airman 1st Class Matt Garner and Senior Airman Pete Vicini clear out their weapons during a Pre-Ranger Course training.

**Airmen participate** in a pre-ranger training exercise during the two week course, held on Creech Air Force Base, Nev.

**Airmen use rocks,** army figure toys and pieces of paper to illustrate a Pre-Ranger Course training mission.

There is nothing to say. Excuses are not tolerated and everything this man, their instructor, says is gospel anyway. He's earned the right to yell at them, to ride them and to tell them how it is. He's been there, done that again and again. He doesn't even need to open his mouth for the men to know this. That small tab on his shirt speaks more than he ever could, the small tab that says "Ranger."

This battle wasn't being waged in the Persian Gulf. It was being staged in a piece of desert near Las Vegas, Nev., as part of the Air Force Pre-Ranger Course.

The goal is simple: Bring Airmen from around the Air Force to this barren stretch of land, give them a heavy dose of combat and leadership training and see if they have what it takes to attend the Army's Ranger Training Course at Fort Benning, Ga.

"Not many people know it, but Airmen can attend the ranger course," said Senior Master Sgt. Darryl LeBouef, superintendent of the pre-ranger course. "What we

do here is prepare Airmen for that course and make sure that if they go they'll have a good chance of passing."

The course does this by mimicking a lot of what the Airmen might see at ranger school, training scenarios like water survival, conducting patrols, assembling and disassembling weapons, radio familiarization and

are required to perform this same test.

"We want to make sure when an Airman leaves here and goes on to ranger school, he knows what to expect and knows he can do it," Sergeant LeBouef said.

The school has a 45-percent attrition rate, meaning nearly half of all ranger candidates will not make it

## EVERYONE WANTS THAT TAB, BUT IT JUST DOESN'T HAPPEN THAT WAY.

— Staff Sgt. Seth Hunter

knowing how to land navigate during the day and at night.

The training also includes a rigorous physical fitness test.

Airmen hoping to attend ranger school need to be able to run five miles in less than 40 minutes, do 49 push-ups and 59 sit-ups in two minutes and perform six pull-ups. Airmen attending pre-ranger school

through the course. And these candidates are all service members who are experienced and in good physical condition.

"Army Ranger training is considered one of the hardest combat courses on the planet. To earn a ranger tab, these men need to perform at their very best in the worst of conditions," Sergeant





LeBouef said.

The course isn't just about preparing Airmen for Fort Benning, though. At its core, the course is less about patrolling the desert and eating snakes and more about leadership.

"What we really do here is teach Airmen how to be small-unit leaders," said Staff Sgt. Seth Hunter, an instructor. "The course teaches the basics of leading, leading people when they're tired and hungry."

In today's Air Force, these skills are in high demand. More and more, Airmen are finding themselves deployed to environments where they work alongside Soldiers, outside the wire, and even see combat.

"So, this course doesn't just prepare Airmen for ranger school, it also prepares them to be leaders in this modern Air Force," Sergeant LeBouef said.

Which is good, because the chances of making it to ranger school are very slim, even if an Airman passes the pre-ranger course.

"It's not automatic," Sergeant

Hunter said. "Passing here isn't a ticket to Fort Benning. We evaluate each student and choose those who we think will have the best chance at ranger school."

The numbers show just how few are chosen. Since the early 1980s, when the course started, fewer than 220 Airmen have graduated from the Army Ranger Training Course. Still, Airmen who do go are passing at a very high rate.

"Right now, the Air Force has a 90-percent pass rate at ranger school," Sergeant LeBouef said. "And that's due in large part to this course. We're making sure Airmen have the tools they need before they go."

This is good for the students, and something they appreciate, even if it means long days, longer nights and a hectic schedule.

"Oh yeah, you suffer from a lack of food and sleep and all in austere conditions," said Staff Sgt. Evan Barnhart, a pre-ranger student who is a tactical air controller. "But you learn what your body can and

can't do and what you're made of. And, when it's all said and done, you really feel prepared for ranger school."

The school is part toughness, part physicality and all about mental strength. This mixture is necessary to ensure each student is tested, tried and pushed to the limit. While each one wants to earn the title ranger, only a select few can earn it. Less than one percent of the U.S. Army is ranger-qualified.

"It's a pretty exclusive group, and everyone wants that tab," Sergeant Hunter said. "But it just doesn't happen that way."

Lieutenant Johnson is hoping it does. He's made it through the pre-ranger course and will now wait to see if he's recommended to attend the real thing at Fort Benning.

If he goes, he'll do his best to earn that tab. It's not just a piece of cloth, either. It's a symbol of determination, hard work and ability. Wearing that tab, being called "Ranger," means being among the best the U.S. military has to offer. 🦋

**(from left) Airman 1st Class Sean Soria pulls Staff Sgt. Evan Barnhart during a pre-ranger school training exercise. Airmen who successfully complete the course can be selected to attend the U.S. Army Ranger School at Ft. Benning, Ga., for official training.**

**1st Lt. Ralph Johnson takes a knee as he waits for instructions. Lieutenant Johnson is assigned to Moody Air Force Base, Ga.**